

Legal Aid looks to legislators for help

By Robyn L. Minor

Sunday, January 26, 2003

Still stinging from federal grant cuts, Kentucky Legal Aid's director is hoping the General Assembly will help heal the wounds.

"We found a sponsor for legislation," Director Scott Crocker said. "Rep. Charles Geveden has introduced legislation that will increase the Access to Justice supplement on court filing fees."

The legislation would increase that supplement on filing civil cases from \$5 to \$10 in district courts and from \$10 to \$20 in circuit courts. Basic filing fees would then be \$55.50 in district court and \$118 in circuit.

The Access to Justice fees are sent to a foundation that provides money to legal aid services such as Bowling Green's Kentucky Legal Aid. That office provides legal aid in non-criminal cases to low-income, elderly or disabled residents in 35 counties.

The Kentucky Bar Association is supporting the legislation.

"They felt the additional filing fee would not prevent people from being able to file lawsuits," Crocker said.

In fact, the additional fees will ensure wider access to the judicial system for Kentucky's poor, said Geveden, D-Wickliffe.

"I was pleased to (sponsor the legislation) because it will provide access to legal services to the poor and underprivileged in Kentucky that otherwise would have been denied them because of federal budget cuts and because of some reduction in funds because of state budget," Geveden said.

Statewide, legal aid budgets were cut \$1.58 million. The proposed legislation is expected to generate about \$1.5 million.

Because of about \$300,000 in cuts, Kentucky Legal Aid in Bowling Green is in the process of closing its Hopkinsville office and already has closed and consolidated others.

A total of six full-time positions and one part-time position, including attorneys and secretarial or clerical positions, were eliminated.

If legislation passes and more funding comes in, cuts in services would be re-evaluated.

The Access to Justice money is distributed to legal aid agencies based on a poverty population formula. About 21 percent of the fees would come to this Kentucky Legal Aid office, Crocker said.

“We have bipartisan support on this issue and it isn’t a tax increase,” he said. “... There is no one actively lobbying against it, so we hope it would pass.”

Geveden agrees that the bill’s chances for passage “are pretty reasonable.”

And while he is pleased to have the endorsement of the bar association and others, Geveden said, “The best endorsements come from people at home.

“And I think ... they are doing a good job having people contacting legislators to encourage their support.”

To track the proposed legislation – HB 163 – visit the Web site www.lrc.state.ky.us. To leave a message for a legislator in support of the proposal, call (800) 372-7181.